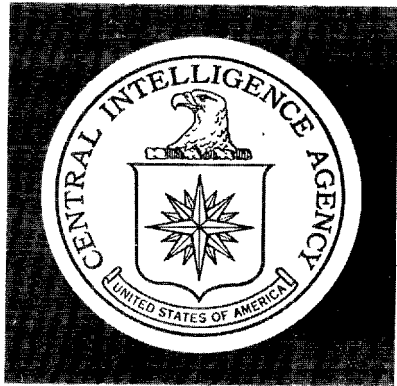


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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

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# Intelligence Memorandum

## *North Vietnam's Ability to Withstand Manpower Attrition*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
June 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

North Vietnam's Ability to Withstand  
Manpower Attrition

Summary

This memorandum analyzes North Vietnam's ability to withstand manpower attrition at the very high levels sustained during the first five months of 1968.

Manpower losses are placing a heavy burden on North Vietnam but have not exhausted its manpower reserves. Even if losses are sustained at their present high levels, North Vietnam can maintain the combat forces in South Vietnam at their current strength well beyond 1969.

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The sharp acceleration of manpower inputs into the South and the need to sustain them over extended periods of time will, however, produce increasingly severe strains on North Vietnam. Both military and civilian morale may decline, and the combat effectiveness of the Northern troops sent South will suffer. In addition, North Vietnam will have to sacrifice even greater elements of its most prized human resources.

The present and prospective manpower drains may have influenced Hanoi's shift to the current fight-talk strategy in an effort to achieve a decisive outcome in a relatively short period of time. In the final analysis, however, North Vietnam's willingness to bear this manpower burden will be

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determined by the extent to which Hanoi feels that its effort is moving the war toward a satisfactory solution. Hanoi's strategy in short will be dictated more by political judgments than by simple questions of physical capability.

Enemy losses in North Vietnam, Laos, and South Vietnam have reached record levels during 1968 and are running in excess of 32,000 a month. More than 90 percent of these losses take place in South Vietnam. Because the Viet Cong have only a limited recruitment capability -- an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 a month -- most manpower replacements must come from the North.

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The limits of estimated Viet Cong recruitment capabilities would indicate that North Vietnam might have to provide as many as 260,000 to 300,000 men a year to replace all losses -- in the North, in Laos, and in the South. This requirement seems excessive because the losses in the South may be overstated or include personnel in low-order irregular units.

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A possible requirement to furnish as many as 240,000 men to the South and to make up losses in the North and in Laos will force North Vietnam to dig deeply into its manpower reserves. The estimated requirements far exceed the annual draft input of about 120,000 males. To furnish the remainder North Vietnam has several options. It can draw down its in-country military establishment, but, unless it is willing to go into the strategic reserve, this option would provide only about 50,000 troops. It could also widen draft age limits for military service. A large part of this manpower -- from about 25 to 30 percent -- must come from the civilian labor force which contains an estimated

mobilization pool of 500,000 physically fit males. It is estimated that this drain will not be excessive as long as North Vietnam can continue to import increasing amounts of foodstuffs and consumer goods from its Communist allies.

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[REDACTED] the net change from 1 January to 30 April has been an increase of only about 10,000 troops.

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It is apparent, however, that further expansion is under way. [REDACTED]

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## I. Assumptions

This analysis of North Vietnam's capability to withstand manpower attrition is based on the following assumptions:

1. The level of combat during 1968 and 1969 will result in enemy manpower losses at the extremely high rate sustained during the first five months of 1968.

2. Manpower requirements must be met completely from resources within North Vietnam and South Vietnam, with no manpower inputs from third countries.

3. The present bombing of North Vietnam will continue, and, because of uncertainty about future bombing programs, the North Vietnamese will not feel free to disband the civilian labor forces or air defense forces organized against the bombing program.

4. The North Vietnamese will attempt to furnish manpower without reducing their strategic reserve, estimated to be about 300,000 troops.

## II. Present Manpower Distribution

### A. North Vietnam

#### 1. Military Forces

The North Vietnamese are estimated to have about 500,000 men in the Regular Armed Forces and another 400,000 in the militia/security forces as of 1 April 1968. About 35,000 of these troops are deployed in Laos; an estimated 115,000 to 130,000 regular troops and support personnel are deployed in South Vietnam. ☐

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The North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam are a significant element of the total enemy combat strength in South Vietnam. They account for about 70 percent of the organized strength of Main and Local Force units.

## 2. Civilian Labor Force

North Vietnam has an estimated 10.4 million people in the 15-to-64 age group. Excluding the 500,000 in the armed forces and the approximately 120,000 students 15 years of age and above, the civilian labor forces comprises about 9.8 million. The number of civilian workers that have been required to offset the effects of airstrikes on North Vietnam is estimated to be about 600,000, including full-time and part-time workers, both male and female of all ages. Nearly a third of these workers are occupied full-time in the reconstruction and maintenance of lines of communication and in the movement of supplies. The part-time civilian force required for war-related tasks is used primarily as conditions warrant in civil defense activities, bomb damage repair, and movement of supplies.

### B. South Vietnam

The Viet Cong have established an organized insurgency base that numbers roughly 500,000 people, including the NVA troops in South Vietnam. This insurgency base includes organized military and irregular units as well as the political infrastructure. Less than half of the people are full-time personnel in the organized military and irregular units that constitute a true military threat. The remainder includes large numbers of older people and youths as well as women, most of them organized on a part-time basis. Although they are vital to the functioning of the VC infrastructure and are important for support of military forces, they do not constitute offensive military threats.

## III. Manpower Availabilities

### A. North Vietnam

#### 1. Annual Additions

Of North Vietnam's population of 18.7 million at the beginning of 1968, approximately

2.8 million are males within the draft ages of 17 and 35. About 1.5 million of these draft-age males are believed to be physically fit, and about 500,000 are already in the armed forces, leaving a potential military manpower pool in the civilian labor force of more than one million physically fit draft age men. During 1968, slightly less than 200,000 will reach the military service age and an estimated 120,000 of these probably would be fit for military service. Although total forces have increased only slightly since the beginning of 1967, induction at an annual level of 100,000 to 120,000 was almost certainly continued during 1967 to replace normal attrition and the greatly increased Communist losses in South Vietnam. If Communist losses continue at the level of the first five months of this year and if the North Vietnamese replace these losses, the estimated 120,000 physically fit men reaching draft age this year will fall far short of meeting these demands. Three alternatives are available to make up this deficit: (a) further reducing in-country forces; (b) tapping the physically fit civilian manpower pool; or (c) widening the draft age limits for military service.

## 2. In-Country Forces

The current Joint Staff/DIA estimate is that North Vietnam probably considers about 300,000 of the present in-country forces necessary to provide for defense of the homeland. This basic defense force includes six infantry divisions, air and coastal defense forces, and command and logistics elements. A force of about 50,000 would be available for out-of-country deployment during the last half of 1968. This diversion of 50,000 military personnel would be a one-time nonrecurring input to the Communist force level in South Vietnam until such time as the original units were regenerated in the North.

## 3. Civilian Labor Force

North Vietnam has a civilian manpower pool of nearly one million physically fit draft-age males. An estimated 500,000 of these could be mobilized from the civilian labor force for military service without grave disruption to the economy.\*

\* *In addition, many of the 120,000 students above the age of 15 could be put to work to replace draft-age laborers not now in military service.*

As with the drawdown of in-country military forces, the drains from the labor force would be a one-time nonrecurring gain for the armed forces and when exhausted could not be regenerated.

Labor could be drawn from several sectors of the economy. The North Vietnamese labor force is largely unskilled, underemployed, and, at least in agriculture, seasonally unemployed. Agriculture (including animal husbandry, fishing, and forestry) employs about 7 million people, or almost 70 percent of the civilian labor force, and is particularly labor-intensive. It is estimated that at least 200,000 workers could be drawn from agriculture without a decline in agricultural output because of the low average productivity of North Vietnamese farmers. Moreover, additional labor can be withdrawn from agriculture by substituting imported food for lost domestic production. Of the approximately 800,000 in the industrial labor force, about 600,000 are engaged in handicraft activities. Probably about one-fourth of these could be diverted to the armed forces without a significant loss in essential output. Consumer goods would be scarcer, but increased imports could be at least a partial offset. It is estimated that 10 percent of the 1.1 million workers in the trade and services sector of the economy could be diverted to the military establishment with only a slight effect on the economy. Much of the labor in the trade and services sector is engaged in marginal occupations such as personal services, sanitation work, and the like. These workers can be easily replaced by less trained people, without serious economic disruption.

#### B. South Vietnam

Since the beginning of the year the Communists have substantially increased the South Vietnamese population under their control and, consequently, the manpower available for recruitment. Although the Communists claim that by the end of March 1.6 million people had been "liberated," US population control data indicate that the figure probably is closer to 1 million. At the end of 1967, the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) recorded 2.8 million people under VC control. At the end of March 1968, the HES data recorded more

than 3.1 million under VC control. An additional 720,000 were added to the contested category. The VC are able to draw on this base plus other population groups not directly under their control.

#### IV. Manpower Losses

Losses sustained by Viet Cong/North Vietnamese enemy forces have been running at unprecedented rates during 1968. On a monthly basis, total manpower losses have exceeded 32,000 a month, more than 90 percent of these taking place in South Vietnam.

##### A. South Vietnam

According to MACV estimates, Viet Cong/North Vietnamese forces have lost more than 145,000 men during the first five months of 1968. This estimate includes all causes -- killed, died of wounds, disabled, died of sickness and accident, deserted, defected, and captured. We believe this estimate is high enough to include those lost from airstrikes, losses during infiltration, and would note that it probably includes large numbers from the insurgency base outside the Regular Forces. The average monthly rate of 29,000 is in contrast to a monthly rate of about 13,000 during the last quarter of 1967.

##### B. North Vietnam and Laos

It is estimated that the forces within North Vietnam lose personnel, through such causes as disability, retirement, and losses resulting from air attack, at a maximum annual rate of about 10 percent. This amounts to about 35,000 a year, or a monthly rate of about 3,000 persons. North Vietnamese civilian and military losses resulting from air attacks have been negligible since 31 March because of the reduced level of bombing.

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V. Current Manpower Replacement

A. Viet Cong Recruiting

Primarily because of the large rural population now under Viet Cong control, the Communists in South Vietnam have apparently been able to come by sufficient manpower to replace most of the heavy 1968 losses in Viet Cong organizations. But the average quality of these forces has declined somewhat. We believe that present Viet Cong monthly recruiting is on the order of 7,000 to 10,000. The Viet Cong have resorted to an increasing degree of coercion in its recruitment program during the last few months. To the extent that the need for coercion may portend an inability to keep recruitment at the 7,000 to 10,000 level then the drain on North Vietnamese manpower could become even greater than estimated but still would not exceed North Vietnamese capabilities.

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## VI. Manpower Replacement Capabilities

### A. Quantitative Aspects

Total estimated enemy manpower losses during 1968 are heavily weighted by the MACV estimates of losses in South Vietnam, which account for more than 90 percent of the estimated average monthly loss of 32,000 persons, or more than 380,000 for the year. The MACV estimate of 29,000 losses a month includes in it a substantial number of laborers and other civilians as well as persons in lower order irregular elements such as Self-Defense Forces and Assault Youth. Thus they should probably be regarded as an overstatement of the manpower that must be provided to maintain the strength of the regular military forces.

It is impossible to differentiate between losses sustained by regular combat units and other categories of organized forces or civilians. The available evidence on current recruitment efforts makes it apparent that the Communists are intent on and have the capability of maintaining the strength of regular combat forces and guerrillas at their pre-Tet levels.

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Recruitment in South Vietnam is estimated to have averaged about 7,000 to 10,000 a month thus far in 1968. Unless Viet Cong control over its population base is significantly eroded, this rate can probably be maintained, giving the Viet Cong a total manpower input of from 80,000 to 120,000 for 1968.

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With this capability in the South and assuming that the remainder of the manpower burden must be assumed by North Vietnam, then Handi must provide from 260,000 to 300,000 personnel.

Quantitatively this burden is within North Vietnam's capabilities, as shown in the following tabulation for 1968 and 1969::

	Thousand Persons	
	1968	1969
Annual draft	120	120
Military redeployment	50	
Drawdown from civilian labor force	90 to 130	140 to 180
<i>Total</i>	<i>260 to 300</i>	<i>260 to 300</i>

These manpower requirements imply a draw-down of the civilian labor force of about 110,000 in 1968 and 160,000 in 1969. This is roughly 25 to 30 percent per year of the 500,000 laborers estimated to be available for mobilization. A large number of these would already have had some training, being members of reserve or militia units. Thus the quantitative limits of North Vietnamese manpower would not be exhausted by the end of 1969 and indeed could be continued for at least another year or two.

The provision of this much manpower implies that North Vietnam would replace all losses, regardless of the type of forces sustaining them. This is doubtful because, as noted above, many of the casualties are sustained by low-order irregular elements or civilians.

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It should be noted that about 40,000 of the estimated losses are sustained by forces in North

Vietnam and Laos.

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B. Qualitative Aspects

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To the extent that quality has deteriorated, it may partly reflect the limitations of the North Vietnamese training base.

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there has been a decline in morale and fighting effectiveness. Training obviously has an important influence on morale as well as combat effectiveness.

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There is an increasing body of evidence indicating that the high number of casualties being taken by enemy forces and the fear of air attack contribute to a decline in troop morale and combat effectiveness.

These problems have not yet reached serious proportions, but they must be of some concern to Hanoi.

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Formal non-commissioned officer (NCO) and officer training schools, as well as the military academy at Son Tay, were abandoned after they were taken under attack by bombing. Officer training classes -- conducted at division level and lasting from two to three months -- are composed of senior NCO's or individuals who have

completed at least seven years of formal schooling. NCO training is no longer mandatory, but some divisions conduct short courses. Soldiers who have good records and exhibit political zeal are eligible to hold NCO rank.

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The North Vietnamese army is apparently experiencing a shortage of trained personnel to fill platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and squad leader positions, and the overall competence of the company-grade officer has declined. These factors are probably the result of increased demands of the air defense effort, the upgrading of several brigades to divisions, and the requirement to create additional divisions, regiments, and supporting elements for infiltration into South Vietnam. This quality problem will probably continue to plague the North Vietnamese army. It undoubtedly has caused some reduction in the effectiveness and regenerative capacity of some units.

The fact that the 1968 filler groups are comprised increasingly of men outside of the prime military age group -- many of them young, recent draftees and older reservists -- is consistent with Hanoi's desire not to weaken the quality of the home army. Hanoi, moreover, may be trying to avoid creating a large gap in particular age groups and to husband a share of the superior manpower in each age group. Some evidence of this is the fact that large numbers of prime candidates for lower level military leadership could be found among the student population which has expanded during the past three years, despite the increasing need for troops.

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# VIII. The Price of Maintaining Force Levels

North Vietnam's manpower losses in support of the war in the South have been high, amounting to probably well over 200,000 men. It is possible that the present manpower drain and the prospects for its continuation have been an important influence on the North Vietnamese in their shift of policy on the war this year. Their decision to move to a "fight-talk" stage in the conflict -- seen in the current Paris talks -- appears to involve a desire to achieve a "decisive" outcome in the war in 1968 if possible, or in 1969 at the latest. Rather than face the drain of a continued long and piecemeal attritional war with the US, Hanoi may have opted for a near maximum effort in the hope that it could force a decisive outcome in a relatively short period of time. It may have viewed such an effort as potentially less costly -- if it could be brought off successfully -- than a continuation of its strategy of prior years.

Having opted for such a course the North Vietnamese will now be under strong pressure to make sure that their gamble pays off, and that the

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expenditure of manpower is not in vain. They may thus be more willing to accept some compromises, at least on the less significant elements of a settlement in the South, than they would have been had they attempted to continue along past policy lines. In the final analysis, however, Hanoi's willingness to continue to bear the burden of a stepped up input of manpower to the South will relate primarily to its judgment on extent to which the effort is moving the situation in South Vietnam toward a satisfactory solution.

As the North assumes an increasing role in the fighting, its share of the manpower drain is undoubtedly a matter of growing concern. Nevertheless, Hanoi shows no signs yet of backing away from its commitment and is apparently willing to increase its manpower investment if that is the price of achieving its political goals.

The gross levy on North Vietnam's manpower base will have reached highly significant levels if the inputs observed thus far in 1968 have to be maintained for extended periods of time. The manpower reserves are, however, adequate to absorb this level of attrition well beyond 1969. Hanoi, moreover, has other options that make the quantitative manpower drain more manageable. These would include a widening of draft age limits, additional drawdowns from the in-country military force, a reduction of the air defense and labor forces still kept intact to react to the bombings, and deeper cuts into the civilian labor force. The major effect of most of these measures would be an increase in North Vietnam's vulnerability to offensive military action, an increase in its dependence on its Communist allies for material aid, and additional personal sacrifice and deprivation.

Although a sustained and heavy input of manpower into the South is within North Vietnam's capabilities, there are additional considerations that make the effort a costly venture. These are primarily the long-term effects of substantial manpower losses and the probability of a worsening of morale among military forces and civilians.

Although morale in North Vietnam is adversely affected by results of the fighting in the South, the regime tightly controls the amount and kind of

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information made available on the home front. The nature of the war, its direction, and the level of casualties suffered by North Vietnamese is probably not fully understood by most North Vietnamese. This knowledge will, however, be more difficult to conceal as the manpower commitment is sustained and casualties continue to mount. As draft calls continue, the effect on the morale of draft age males within North Vietnam probably is debilitating. By appealing to patriotism and by expounding the theme that victory is within sight, the regime is probably able to minimize the degree of resistance and resentment. The main contact that the average North Vietnamese civilian has with the war is the US bombing in the North, which has caused the separation of families, the loss of possessions, mental anguish, and physical pain. With the cessation of the bombing north of the 19th parallel, the morale of much of the population has undoubtedly improved. To convince the populace of the continuing need for the draft and other sacrifices, the regime is striving to remind the people that the US bombing program continues in part of North Vietnam and could be expanded at any time.

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Although there are indications that the average quality of North Vietnamese troops has probably declined somewhat, military effectiveness has not yet been seriously affected.

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The increasing evidence of declining morale among military forces and the likelihood that this will become more pervasive among civilians cannot be overlooked by Hanoi. These problems, however, are not governing for the regime. In a society as rigidly controlled as is that in North Vietnam, it is unlikely that popular disaffection will grow to the point at which it begins to exert a controlling influence on Hanoi's war policies.

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The final determinant of Hanoi's willingness to sacrifice manpower will be its judgment of the likely course of events in the South. If the regime is convinced that its persistence can lead (1) to a toppling of the South Vietnamese leadership and the ascendancy of the National Liberation Front or the Alliance, (2) to a weakening of US determination to stay in the war, or (3) to a movement of the Paris talks along paths favorable to Hanoi's interest, the price will seem worthwhile.

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